

One Hot Mess

You'll laugh. You'll cry. You'll feel better about yourself. I promise.

Tuesday, June 20, 2017

Not Equipped

I am not equipped for this task. That's what I thought, for months after he asked me. His message sat in my in-box, blinking, criticizing, reminding. I see you, it said. I see you not doing this thing you promised to do.

He didn't ask again, but I knew he wouldn't. My disappointing failure to do this was going to be just that: My own failure and my own disappointment.

I wrote to him and told him I was halfway there. I had read my friend Ishmael's book of poems, *Rock Piles Along the Eddy*, but I couldn't do the second part. I couldn't write about it.

Sorry it's taken me so long. I haven't forgotten, I promise. But I'm not equipped to do this. That's what I told him, in so many words. I thought your poems were beautiful, but what do I know? What does a Jewish woman, born and raised in New York City, and an Alaska transplant/intruder/interloper know about the poetry of an Inupiaq and Tlingit Alaska Native man?

Moreover, I'm not a literary critic. I write about farts, nipples, Cheetos, and Donald Trump's spray tan for tweets, shares, and viral laughs. I don't know anything about poems. Or if I do, I've forgotten. And when I *did* know, it was the classic western kind. Keats, Yeats, Walt Whitman. Norton Anthology stuff. I have nothing to say.

He assured me that I did have something to say, which is why he had asked me to say something. And over the course of some back-and-forth, I realized he was right. The problem was not that I had nothing to say. To the contrary, I had plenty to say. I was just afraid to say it.

The night before, I'd asked Geoff what my "angle" on this post should be. He said "don't go there." By "there" I knew what he meant. He meant The Things We Don't Talk About. For us, maybe why we chose to circumcise our son and why we don't have a Christmas tree. The Holocaust, slavery, genocide, diaspora, assimilation, competing in the historical trauma "suffering Olympics." As if there could be a Gold Medal in such a thing.

Preposterous.

But, Ishmael said, this is the crux of dialogue. It is the crux of my blog, too, though the medium seems trivial, petty and ephemeral. To explore and probe with authenticity and sometimes vulgarity, and hopefully some depth, the things we don't like to face. The Things We Don't Talk About. To stare into the blinding sun of those things, open my eyes wide, and let them burn my retinas.

What does it mean to do that in this particular instance? Well, I think it means to acknowledge that there is a reason I do not like to wear my Alaska Native jewelry and why my lavender kuspuk stays buried in a drawer, out of sight. It feels dishonest and appropriating to adorn myself with these objects.

It means "passing" as "white," and collecting all the prizes—big and small—awarded for the genetic happenstance of white skin. Being in, of, defending, and benefiting from the systems erected and imposed amid the ruins of a very recent and evident cultural genocide, the reverberations of which are felt, seen, and heard everywhere, every day, in this state.

To concede the point that it is more than "white guilt" or "white tears." Or being "woke" or "calling people out" for being "not woke." It is those things, of course, but above all, it is white complicity.

A few lines from one of Ishmael's poems in RPATE (my invented acronym for this, Ishmael's second collection of poems) reminded me where the rubber of my reluctance met the road of necessity to do the simple thing Ishmael had asked of me:

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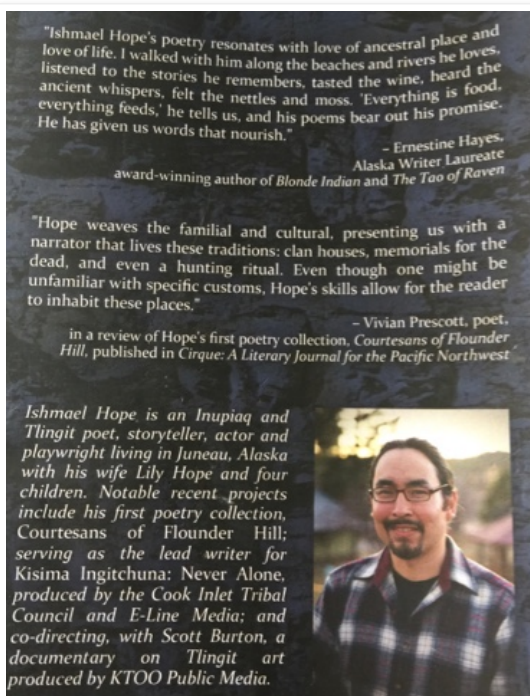
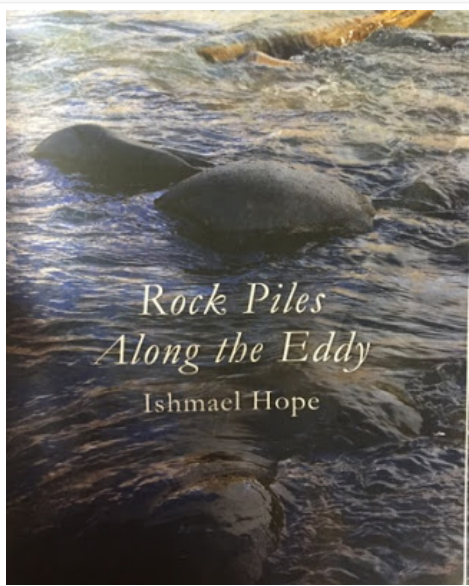
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This is Native land.
 Until you recognize this, there is no justice.
 Until you act on this, there is no justice.
 Until you dig deeper than empathy, there is no justice.
 Until you give up what you never should have had in the first place, there is no justice.
 Taking up the space, the land, the airtime, the mic, the profits,
 the recognition, the dialogue, the conversation.
 It'll never feel right.

Steps Toward Dismantling Collective Psychosis on Colonized Land is the title of the poem from which this excerpt is taken.

In Alaska, we live in the wake of a massive cultural genocide perpetrated with surgical, devastating precision on a complex and rich culture. This is a fact. To acknowledge it as objective reality—and not a matter of subjective perception—is, just maybe, one tiny step toward dismantling the collective psychosis that none of it ever happened.



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